Mindful Gardens

DESIGNED FOR LIVING. INSPIRED BY NATURE

SENSORY GARDEN GUIDE

A practical guide to creating a garden that engages the senses, supports wellbeing and connects people with nature.

SEE • HEAR • SMELL • TOUCH • TASTE

A sensory garden is not simply a collection of scented plants. It is a carefully considered space where planting, materials, movement, sound, light and seasonal change work together to create an experience.

From a small home garden to a community, care or therapeutic setting, sensory design can make outdoor space more engaging and meaningful for people of all ages and abilities.

What is a sensory garden?

Designing for experience rather than simply appearance.

A sensory garden is an outdoor space deliberately designed to stimulate the five senses: Sight, Sound, Smell, Touch and Taste. Good sensory design also considers movement, texture, seasonal change, wildlife and the emotional atmosphere of a place.

The most successful gardens feel natural rather than like a checklist of sensory features. The aim is to create layers of interest that people can discover at their own pace.

Why sensory design matters

BENEFIT	WHAT IT CAN DO
Connection with nature	Encourages people to slow down, observe seasonal change and spend meaningful time outdoors.
Engagement	Provides things to notice, touch, smell, listen to and explore, making the garden more interactive.
Wellbeing	Time in nature and enjoyable outdoor experiences can support relaxation, reflection and a sense of calm.
Learning	Creates opportunities to explore plant life, wildlife, food growing, seasons and natural processes.
Inclusive experiences	Can be designed around different abilities, ages and ways of interacting with the garden.
Year-round interest	Evergreens, bark, seedheads, fragrance, wildlife and seasonal planting keep the space changing.

TOP TIP: A sensory garden can be particularly valuable in spaces used by families, schools, communitygroups, workplaces and care settings - but the principles work just as well in a private domestic garden.

DESIGN FOR THE FIVE SENSES

Use a balance of stimulation and calm.

SENSE	BENEFIT	WHAT IT CAN DO
SIGHT	Colour, form, movement, contrast, seasonal change, wildlife and focal points.	Ornamental grasses, flowering perennials, berries, bark, water and sculptural plants.
SOUND	Wind, water, birds and rustling foliage can create an evolving soundscape.	Bamboo used carefully, grasses, seedheads, water bowls, bird-friendly planting.
SMELL	Place fragrance where people naturally walk, sit or brush past plants.	Lavender, thyme, rosemary, honeysuckle, roses, mint and scented pelargoniums.
TOUCH	Contrast soft, rough, smooth, cool, warm and tactile surfaces.	Lamb's ear, ornamental grasses, mossy textures, smooth stone, timber and textured bark.
TASTE	Edible plants can turn the garden into a hands-on experience.	Herbs, strawberries, raspberries, apples, edible flowers and vegetables.

Sight



Flowering perennials

Sound



Water Sphere

Smell



Lavender

Touch



Ornamental Grass

Taste



Rosemary

Think beyond plants. A sensory garden is created by the whole space. Paving or gravel underfoot, timber handrails, water.

TOP TIP: Create quiet as well as stimulation. Not every area needs to be colourful, scented or busy. A calm seating nook, soft planting and a clear view can be just as important as interactive features.

CHOOSING PLANTS

Select plants for sensory qualities, not just flower colour.

Choose plants that are suited to the site first - soil, light, exposure, drainage and available space. Then layer in sensory qualities.

Reliable structure from evergreen plants, shrubs and grasses can provide a strong framework while perennials and bulbs deliver seasonal changes.

PLANT	SENSORY QUALITY	WHY CONSIDER IT
LAVANDULA (LAVENDER)	Smell • Touch • Sight	Strong fragrance, silver foliage and flowers attractive to pollinators. Best in sunny, well-drained positions.
NEPETA (CATMINT)	Smell • Sight • Wildlife	Long flowering period, aromatic foliage and soft, relaxed form.
STACHYS BYZANTINA (LAMB'S EAR)	Touch • Sight	Distinctive soft, velvety leaves create an immediate tactile experience.
STIPA / PENNISETUM-TYPE GRASSES	Sight • Sound • Move-ment	Fine foliage and seedheads move in the breeze, adding rhythm and gentle sound.
THYMUS (THYME)	Smell • Touch • Taste	Aromatic, edible foliage; useful around paths and in sunny areas.
MENTHA (MINT)	Smell • Taste • Touch	Strong fragrance and edible leaves. Best grown in a container to control spread.
ROSE (FRAGRANT VARIETIES)	Smell • Sight • Wildlife	Flowers, colour, fragrance and hips can extend interest across the seasons.
HONEYSUCKLE	Smell • Sight • Wildlife	Fragrant flowers and useful vertical interest; suitable for supports and boundaries.
HERBS & EDIBLES	Taste • Smell • Touch	Chives, sage, rosemary, strawberries and other edible plants encourage interaction.
AMELANCHIER	Sight • Taste • Wildlife	Spring blossom, autumn colour and edible berries, with multi-season structure.

TOP TIP: Don't assume that every fragrant, edible or tactile plant is safe for every audience. If children, pets or vulnerable users will use the garden, review plant toxicity, thorns, irritant sap, allergies and choking hazards as part of the design process. Also, be aware that a calming fragrance for one person, might be overwhelming for another.

HOW TO DESIGN THE SPACE

Make the garden easy to understand, move through and enjoy.

START WITH PURPOSE

Decide who will use the space, what they should be able to do there and how you want the garden to feel.

CREATE A CLEAR ROUTE

A gently curved or clearly defined path can encourage exploration while keeping circulation simple and accessible.

DESIGN IN LAYERS

Use trees or larger shrubs for structure, smaller shrubs for framework, and perennials, grasses and groundcovers for detail.

PLACE SENSORY PLANTS STRATEGICALLY

Put fragrant or tactile plants beside paths and seating so people can experience them naturally.

INCLUDE DESTINATIONS

Create places to sit, pause, observe, garden, eat, talk or simply be quiet.

USE CONTRAST

Combine light and dark foliage, bold and fine textures, open and enclosed areas, and sun and shade.

THINK VERTICALLY

Walls, arches, pergolas, trellis and climbers add fragrance, colour and habitat without needing a large footprint.

PLAN FOR SEASONS

Aim for something worth noticing in every season: blossom, foliage, scent, berries, bark, grasses, seedheads or winter structure.

A simple zoning idea

ZONE	PURPOSE
Welcome	Clear entrance, attractive planting and an immediate sensory cue such as fragrance or movement.
Explore	Pathways, tactile planting, edible areas and seasonal interest.
Pause	Comfortable seating, shade and softer planting for quiet observation or conversation.
Connect	A focal feature such as a tree, water element, view, sculpture or wild-life area.

MAKING A SENSORY GARDEN INCLUSIVE

Design for different ages, abilities and preferences.

An inclusive sensory garden gives people different ways to participate. Some visitors may want to explore actively; others may prefer to sit and observe. Good design provides choice rather than expecting everyone to interact in the same way.

ACCESSIBLE MOVEMENT

Keep key routes firm, stable and sufficiently wide. Avoid unnecessary steps and provide alternatives where level changes are unavoidable.

COMFORTABLE SEATING

Include seats at useful intervals, with some positioned in shade and others in sun. Consider backs, arms and different seat heights.

REACH AND VISIBILITY

Use raised beds, containers or layered planting so sensory features can be experienced without bending or stretching excessively.

WAYFINDING

Use clear routes, visual landmarks, contrasting materials and simple transitions between spaces.

SENSORY CHOICE

Offer both stimulating and calming areas. Avoid making every zone intensely scented, brightly coloured or noisy.

SAFETY

Consider slippery surfaces, trip hazards, water depth, sharp edges, poisonous plants, thorns and maintenance requirements.

FOR CHILDREN: Incorporate safe opportunities to dig, sow, smell herbs, watch insects, pick suitable fruit and observe seasonal change.

FOR ADULTS AND OLDER VISITORS: Consider comfortable seating, clear circulation, raised planting and ensure easily accessible areas.

TOP TIP: For care and community settings: keep maintenance realistic and consider how staff, volunteers or residents will interact with the space. A beautiful garden that is difficult to maintain can quickly lose its value.

FROM IDEA TO FINISHED GARDEN

A sensory garden works best when design and maintenance are considered together.

STAGE	WHAT TO CONSIDER
1. Assess	Measure the space. Note sun, shade, wind, drainage, soil, existing plants, views and access.
2. Define	Identify users, priorities, desired atmosphere and practical requirements such as seating, storage or play.
3. Design	Develop the layout, planting structure, materials, sensory features, lighting and circulation.
4. Plant	Choose healthy plants suited to the conditions and group them in a way that creates repetition and rhythm.
5. Build	Coordinate hard landscaping, structures, raised beds, paths, irrigation and planting.
6. Maintain	Plan watering, pruning, cutting back, weeding, mulching and seasonal renewal from the outset.

SMALL GARDEN? START WITH ONE SENSORY JOURNEY

You do not need a large garden to create a sensory experience. A small courtyard or border can combine scented herbs beside a path, soft foliage near a seat, grasses for movement, a small tree for seasonal change and edible plants in containers.

MAINTENANCE IS PART OF THE DESIGN

Select plants with mature size and maintenance in mind. Grouping plants with similar needs can simplify watering and care. Leave room to reach plants for pruning and deadheading, and avoid designs that rely on constant replacement to look good.

A USEFUL DESIGN QUESTION: "What do I want someone to notice when they first enter, where do I want them to slow down, and what do I want them to discover as they move through the garden?"

CREATE A GARDEN YOU CAN EXPERIENCE

Sensory garden design is about much more than choosing scented plants. It is about creating a space that feels good to move through, invites curiosity and changes with the seasons.

HOW MINDFUL GARDENS CAN HELP

- Bespoke sensory and wellness garden design for domestic and commercial spaces
- In-person and online garden consultations
- Planting plans and practical horticultural advice
- Workshops and nature-based experiences for schools, community groups and businesses
- Garden maintenance and ongoing horticultural support

Whether you want a peaceful corner, a family garden filled with discovery, or a larger shared space designed around wellbeing, the starting point is understanding how you want people to experience the garden.

3D DESIGNS, PLANTING PLANS AND WORKSHOPS



WORKSHOPS SUCH AS:

- How to design your garden
- Gardening on a budget
- Create a Wellness Garden
- Create a Sensory Garden
- Growing from seed
- Where does your food come from?
- Make a miniature Sensory Garden
- Plant a veg box
- Popagation, cuttings & grafting
- Multiply your plants

& many more.







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SENSORY & WELLNESS DESIGN

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